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SUBJECT: PRT PANJSHIR: FORMER FOREIGN MINISTER ABDULLAH, AT HOME

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) According to former Foreign Minister Abdullah, who maintains a home and strong connections in Panjshir, the province is changing rapidly thanks above all to the new road that connects it with Kabul. He cited education as a key sector for Panjshir,s future and bemoaned the lack of strong leadership with a coherent vision in the capital. Abdullah said some in Kabul envied Panjshir,s success in blocking insurgent violence and poppy cultivation, he added that some Panjshiris in the capital detracted from the province,s reputation. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) PRTers met with Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the former Afghan Foreign Minister, March 22 in his Panjshir home. He had returned from Delhi to the valley with his family to celebrate the Islamic New Year. The talk centered on his views of Panjshir and Kabul. He also demonstrated an up-to-date grasp of U.S. diplomacy, both policy and personnel.

The Province

¶3. (SBU) "Panjshir is full of complexities, and only those who live here, as I did, can come to grasp them," Abdullah said of his adopted province. Asked about change in Panjshir, Abdullah cited the new road as the most powerful agent of progress. The road improvements had cut the drive time from Kabul by over half, from five hours to two. (Note: The road project, funded by USAID, hired Abdullah,s brother-in-law, General Qassim, as a community liaison. Qassim sat in on the meeting. End Note.) Its main effect was to link Panjshir with Kabul. The drive was now so smooth, Abdullah said, as to be disorienting. One arrived in destinations much faster than anticipated.

¶4. (SBU) The entry to the valley, Abdullah said, had changed radically in recent days. It used to be littered with Soviet

vehicles, knocked out by the mujahideen. Now it the debris was cleaned up, but also stripped of history. Abdullah expressed hope that the road would someday extend into Panjshir,s northern districts and then into Badakhshan. He recalled his own experience in that area as a foot soldier of the mujahideen, receiving supplies from Badakhshan funneled through the Anjuman Pass.

¶5. (SBU) As Abdullah,s request, PRTers briefed on seven new schools and a teachers, training college, all funded by the U.S. Commander,s Emergency Response Program (CERP). Abdullah commended the construction, saying education was a key factor in transforming Panjshir and Afghanistan. He emphasized the importance of training teachers, especially female teachers. He deplored the fact that Afghan teachers were lowly paid and poorly trained.

¶6. (SBU) On PRTs, Abdullah lauded their work. He noted he had helped shape the first one, in Gardez, and had followed their subsequent evolution, including the "success story" of the one in Panjshir. In response to his question about the status of the Provincial Development Plan, PRTers told Abdullah it was more of a priority list than a strategic vision, but nonetheless a good start. Abdullah also inquired about the Panjshir line directors; PRTers replied they were uneven, ranging from a few strong ones to several who were incompetent.

The Capital

¶7. (SBU) Turning to Afghanistan outside Panjshir, Abdullah

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said he expected a continuation of military skirmishing between Taliban insurgents and coalition forces. The biggest problem, he said, was in Kabul, where the Afghan leaders were not tackling the medium- and long-run challenges. He criticized the lack of strong leadership with a coherent vision. Further, the Afghan government was not allowing the Afghan people a proper role in its deliberations.

¶8. (SBU) Abdullah recognized that the thin capacity of the Afghan ministries was also a problem. Their expertise was limited, and they often lacked leadership. Somewhat adrift, the ministries were losing touch with the people and the provinces. Ministers needed to get out of Kabul more frequently and travel around the country more extensively, including to Panjshir, which rarely saw a minister.

¶9. (SBU) Kabul, Abdullah continued, needed to work harder at coordinating budgetary resources. The government was doing a poor job in supporting its administrative units in the provinces. The task was complicated by muddled transparency on the part of some international donors. Without better coordination, reconstruction would be hard to sustain.

¶10. (SBU) Asked if Afghans outside Panjshir had views on the province,s success in blocking insurgent violence and poppy cultivation, Abdualh said there was some envy. But, he continued, some Panjshiris in Kabul, through their actions, did no favors for the reputation of their province.

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Although his children are in school in Delhi, Abdullah said he regards his real home as Kabul and Panjshir. He visits Panjshir on occasion. He never misses the September commemorative events for Ahmed Shah Massoud. PRTers last saw him September 10 after the main public commemoration. His living room, where he meets his guests, is filled with pictures of Massoud photographs, paintings, even an etching in black marble. According to PRT contacts,

Abdullah is becoming more active in the Massoud Foundation as a base to voice his political views, including the ones sounded in the PRT meeting. END COMMENT.

NEUMANN